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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001580

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SUBJECT: GOJ WELCOMES POTUS STATEMENT ON ROADMAP BUT
COMMENTATORS REMAIN SKEPTICAL; PM CALLS FOR NATIONAL UNITY

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

Summary

1. (C) In what most here see as the final days before the beginning of a U.S.-led war against Iraq, senior GOJ officials have issued a series of public statements welcoming the President's March 14 Statement on the Roadmap and calling for national unity in the face of imminent challenges. At the same time, the government allowed peaceful anti-war demonstrations to take place March 15 in Amman and Irbid (septel). Comments by Embassy contacts and in the local press make clear that -- the President's statement notwithstanding -- most Jordanians remain deeply skeptical about U.S. motives and plans for the region. End Summary.

GOJ Welcomes President's Roadmap Endorsement

2. (U) Soon after the President's March 14 Rose Garden presentation, King Abdullah and FM Marwan Muasher quickly issued public statements welcoming the news that Washington would publicize the Roadmap soon after the naming of a Palestinian PM. FM Muasher told the official Petra News Service March 14 that "Jordan has constantly called for the need to declare a roadmap and start work immediately on its execution without any modifications," while the King on March 15 said "the announcement . . . gives strong momentum to the efforts that aim at easing tension and violence in Palestinian territories."

Emphasis on National Unity

3. (U) These official comments came a day after statements PM Ali Abul Ragheb had made stressing the need for Jordan to maintain national cohesion and unity, given the regional uncertainties of the moment. In a March 13 meeting with the Secretaries General of Jordan's 30 registered political

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parties, Abul Ragheb stated that "the homeland's security and stability is a collective responsibility" and called on the parties to "carry out their role in making citizens aware of the need to behave responsibly." According to press reports of the gathering, the PM told the assembled party heads that "Jordan, through its conscious (sic) leadership and the joined forces of its institutions and citizens, is able to surpass the difficult circumstances imposed by the regional situation."

Peaceful Anti-War Marches

4. (C) Notwithstanding these statements expressing hope for forward movement on the MEPP and confidence in the Kingdom's inner strength, the GOJ has also recognized the need to allow Jordanians to express their opposition to a possible Iraq war as a means of managing current internal pressures. On March 15, the GOJ allowed large, peaceful demonstrations to be held in Amman and Irbid, the country's third largest city (details septel). While the gatherings (each numbering in the several thousand) were peaceful, the rhetoric was (according to press reports and Embassy security contacts) sharp and anti-American in tone.

Few Minds Changed Regarding U.S. Plans and Motives

5. (C) An initial check of Embassy contacts and the local press indicate that the President's 3/14 statement has thus far done little to alter the Jordanian public's deep skepticism about U.S. policy vis-a-vis Iraq or the MEPP. A common sentiment is that the President's statement is nothing more than a momentary attempt to divert Arab opposition from an Iraq war. One contact told POLFSN "the Roadmap is an obvious cover by Bush to look good while he plans to strike Iraq." Another noted "Bush's words and promises mean

nothing," while former Parliamentarian Mahmoud Kharabsheh (East Banker) told Poloff "nobody believes this means anything."

16. (C) While the Arabic dailies led with President Bush's announcement and the King's welcoming of it as their lead stories, their commentary was deeply skeptical. A cartoon in the influential Ad-Dustour showed President Bush in military garb marching to war while tossing "The Palestinian tranquilizer" pill over his shoulder into the mouth of an ecstatic Arab. Prominent columnist Tariq Masarweh predicts in the semi-official daily al-Rai that the announcement "would do nothing to assuage popular anger or U.S. double standards, and the promised Palestinian state, should it ever materialize despite 'impossible preconditions,' would lack borders, people, a capital and contiguous territory."

17. (C) The government-affiliated English-language Jordan Times took a somewhat more positive tone and characterized the President's statement as "long overdue, but nonetheless welcomed." It went on to note, however, that if the President "is serious about solving the conflict, he should be evenhanded. Before asking the Palestinians for a prime minister with 'real authority,' he should ask Israel for a real commitment to peace." Longtime establishment columnist Musa Keilani summed up the general skepticism by noting "If we are misreading the situation, then let Washington correct it right now by setting a deadline for Israel to publicly undertake to abide by UN Security Council resolutions and then implement that undertaking. Anything short of that would be meaningless and sheer deception."

Comment

18. (C) The King has long expressed the concern that simultaneous conflicts in Iraq and the West Bank could create significant problems for Jordan. The GOJ has been pressing for public release and presidential endorsement of the Roadmap, and will be pleased by the President's remarks. Nonetheless, most Jordanians will view this move as a way to distract world attention from Iraq, and will be convinced of our sincerity only when they see concrete progress toward a Palestinian state.
GNEHM